

At a crossroads? The Anglican impasse: The Anglican impasse

by [A. K. M. Adam](#) in the [March 20, 2007](#) issue

After the evening service on Ash Wednesday, I was led off for coffee and conversation by a group of seminary students who wanted to air their frustrations about the recent meeting of Anglican primates. The primates had issued a call for the Episcopal Church in the U.S. to declare that it will not authorize same-sex blessings and will not elect another openly gay bishop. If the Episcopal Church refuses to take that step, it impairs its place in the worldwide Anglican Communion.

News about the Anglican Communion has focused on the polarities of the present situation. Reporters and bloggers watch Peter Akinola, archbishop of Nigeria, and Robert Duncan, bishop of Pittsburgh, to see what they might do to thwart the Episcopal Church's moves toward bringing gays fully into the ministry of the church. Or they study Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori's words, and note with whom she sat and talked, to see whether she might be winning leaders over to the idea that the Spirit is at work in the church in the U.S. Or they scrutinize Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams to see whether he will declare himself for one party and against the other.

We have not heard much about the kind of people who gathered for coffee the other night. Everyone at the table would line up as theologically "progressive" by superficial indicators, but no one felt comfortable about being cut off from the rest of the Anglican Communion; no Corinthian ear among us said, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body."

We lingered over the failure of simple invocations of the word *justice* to resolve the painful discord in the Anglican family. To what temporal wisdom might we turn to ascertain what justice entails? The word *justice* operates differently in Newark from the way it operates in Kigali, and none of us can so escape our particular convictions as to attain an impartial view of what is truly just.

Indeed, as scripture so persistently reminds us, our own premises about what counts as justice often as not mislead us. The workers in the parable of the vineyard insist on equal pay for equal work, but their master defines justice differently. Likewise, the Prodigal Son's brother protests the unequal generosity his father bestows on the undeserving younger sibling. The Epistle of James identifies mercy as the highest expression of God's just judgment. God's will is not made known to us simply by the preponderance of numbers, whether that preponderance registers in the Episcopal Church's affirmations or the worldwide Anglican Communion's demurrals.

We also heard the voice of Paul reminding us that we do better to be wronged than to engage in the power games by which one party triumphs over another. We wondered how to exercise noncoercive testimony both to our faithfulness to our Anglican identity and to our allegiance to the friends with whom we share full participation in the church's sacramental ministries.

In a certain sense, we recognized Rowan Williams as a representative of this approach. Disappointed as we were that a brilliant theological proponent of the cause of gay Christians had renounced that advocacy in his capacity as archbishop of Canterbury, we could see that he was unwilling to use his power to coerce consciences in a way that would divide the church.

More than one at the table lamented the Episcopal Church's neglect of the ministry of catechesis. Episcopalians who better understood their church's history, its scriptures and its particular tradition would be better equipped to discern wisely and to offer articulate explanations for their discernment. Episcopalians whose involvement with remote congregations and dioceses included not only construction projects and medical support—vital as those are—but also active participation in learning (especially, but not exclusively, in theological education) would have richer opportunities to attend to the divergences between U.S. theology and practice and the faith as it is professed and lived out in the rest of the world. Mutuality builds trust, respect and affection, and I do not doubt that a great portion of the present turbulence can be traced to more superficial involvement with our neighbors in faith.

Mutuality also nurtures the sort of interdependence that strengthens the whole body. On that basis, we refuse to let our imaginations be determined by the apparent forced choice that looms before us. Our calling cannot repudiate the other Anglicans who share our inheritance of the Book of Common Prayer, of the prophetic preaching and sound teaching that characterize the exemplars of what best shapes

Anglican identity. We do not want to be right at the cost of losing the sisters and brothers who pray with us and for us, who teach us and listen to us, who share with us in the vocation of all the baptized, to make known God's glory in all the world. We have no interest in biting and devouring our neighbors, but long to share without reservation in the sweet fruits of the Spirit, sharing in sacramental and temporal harmony with Anglicans around the globe.

That goal cannot entail either "side" coercing the other into simply acceding to one set of premises. And a schism would impair the catholicity, the charity and the theological accountability of all involved.

Immediate schism would satisfy a great many people now, at the cost of causing longer-term heartaches for the generations of Anglicans who will inherit diminished, fractured subsets of a worldwide communion. We would satisfy ourselves and our allies, and leave the task of repairing the breach to our children (and to the saints who worked hard and sacrificed much in order to build what we have broken).

Rowan Williams has probably steered the communion toward that course which best embodies the Anglican propensity to recognize that the church can err, that a catholic communion will always include contentious dissent, and that the surest antidote to partisanship is the patience that affords us perspective on the scope, scale and significance of our disagreements. Much as I wish that Williams could produce miraculous unanimity among the provinces and proponents now deadlocked in bitter acrimony, I guardedly reckon that he is working with characteristic subtlety and carefulness to bring about an outcome that neither quenches the spirit of hope for transformative change nor abandons the precious, fragile gift of communion.